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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 002339

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NEA/FO FOR HALE; ALSO FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/PI AND DRL/NESCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/09/2028

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION AL-GHAD PARTY HEADQUARTERS TORCHED

REF: A. 2007 CAIRO 3527

[1](#)B. CAIRO 346

[1](#)C. CAIRO 2320

Classified By: Ambassador Margaret Scobey for reason  
1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: What had been a legal dispute between rival factions of opposition Al Ghad ("Tomorrow") party founded by imprisoned opposition leader Ayman Nour, turned violent when supporters of a pro-government wing of the party marched on the party's headquarters, controlled by Nour supporters, ostensibly to assert control over the property pursuant to a court order. The party's offices were heavily damaged by fire in the resulting clash. While there are conflicting accounts of responsibility for the violence, it is clear that GoE security forces who were stationed nearby failed to intervene, and the clash ended only when Cairo firefighters arrived to prevent the fire from spreading within the historic downtown building where the headquarters is located. Afterwards, the GoE announced that it is considering charging Gameela Ismail, Nour's wife, and other supporters of the party's Nour faction with arson and other offenses. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On November 6, 100 to 150 supporters of the pro-government wing of Al Ghad party marched on the party headquarters in downtown Cairo, ostensibly to take possession of the headquarters pursuant to a court order naming the pro-government faction's leader, Moussa Moustafa Moussa, the head of the party (ref A). Moussa also claims authority to take possession of the party headquarters by virtue of a February 2008 order issued by Egypt's Political Parties Committee (ref B). The pro-Ayman Nour wing of the party - which includes Ayman Nour's wife Gameela Ismail - controls the party headquarters (privately owned by the Nour family) and was holding a publicly-announced party general assembly meeting there when Mousaa and his supporters arrived. A violent clash ensued, with the rival wings apparently pelting each other with rocks, bottles and even molotov cocktails. Witnesses reported that Moussa supporters - who some witnesses, including the pro-Nour faction leader Ihab Al Khouly, described as thugs and not political activists - were directing flaming aerosol spray at the street-level door leading to the third story headquarters. During the clash, Ghad party offices caught fire, which apparently distracted the rival groups, ending the fighting. The Cairo fire department responded and quickly controlled the fire, limiting damage to the Ghad party headquarters. While witnesses reported seeing large numbers of police nearby, GoE security forces did not intervene to stop the fighting.

[1](#)3. (C) Ismail, who is active in the Ghad party, was present during the clash and was recorded on a cellphone video camera shouting slogans - including "down with Mubarak" - at the pro-government faction. After the clash, Ismail inspected the damage with a representative of the Public Prosecutor's Office. She was later questioned for several hours by the Public Prosecutor into the early morning of November 7, as

were approximately fifty others from both factions. Neither Ismail nor the others were arrested or charged, but MENA, the GoE information service, issued a statement on November 6 announcing that the prosecutor was considering filing arson and other charges against Ismail and fellow Nour faction leaders.

¶4. (C) On November 8, Al Ghad party Vice President Wael Nawara (from the pro-Nour wing), who was in the building on November 6, gave us his account of the clash. According to Nawara, pro-regime "thugs" attacked the party headquarters in an attempt to destroy the offices and injure members of the party's Ayman Nour faction. Nawara said that he had requested police protection for the party's November 6 general assembly well in advance because he feared an attack from the pro-GOE Moussa Mustafa Moussa faction, but that the police did not respond to his request. He asserted that pro-regime thugs, not Moussa faction politicians, deliberately tried to burn the party offices. According to Nawara, fire fighters were standing by to douse the flames once the Ghad party offices were destroyed in order to prevent the fire from spreading throughout the building, which also houses landmark cafes and restaurants. Former Ghad party senior official and founder of the independent newspaper "Al-Masry Al-Youm" Hisham Kassem told us that as soon as the flames broke out he tried to call the fire department on Nawara's behalf to request immediate intervention, but the fire department claimed that it was unable to respond due to bureaucratic reasons.

¶5. (C) Nawara speculated that the government had become concerned over the Nour faction's recent successful

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recruiting drive on Facebook in advance of the faction's November 6 General Assembly and November 8 elections, and therefore decided to disrupt and undermine its activities. (Note: The Ghad party faction postponed its elections due to the fire. End note.) Nawara opined that the regime orchestrated public comments from the Moussa faction of the party accusing Nour faction officials of starting the fire with molotov cocktails in order to discredit them just when their recruiting campaign was beginning to achieve positive results. According to Nawara, the GOE chose to attack the party headquarters November 6 out of a calculation that the world media and the USG would be distracted in the aftermath of the November 4 U.S. Presidential elections.

¶6. (C) Separately, Hisham Kassem shared with us his analysis of the GOE's motives, speculating that the regime is trying to destroy the last independent remnants of the Ghad party in advance of what he believes are regime plans to release former Ghad party chairman Ayman Nour from prison shortly after January 20, 2009, as a good will gesture to the new U.S. administration. Kassem asserted that with Al Ghad's offices destroyed and Nour faction senior officials under criminal indictment for starting the fire, the regime has incapacitated the independent wing of the party. Kassem believed that the GOE would feel comfortable releasing Nour only once it has dismantled his party apparatus in order to diminish any political threat Nour could pose once he leaves prison. Kassem cautioned that criticism of Nour's detention or calls for his release from President-elect Obama or members of his transition team could cause the GOE to keep Nour in prison out of concern that the Egyptian public would believe the regime would be bowing to U.S. pressure in releasing Nour.

¶7. (C) Comment: Nawara's eyewitness account that pro-GOE thugs started the fire is plausible, given the regime's history of working to fragment Egypt's already weak political opposition. However, the circumstances surrounding the fire are unclear, and we have seen conflicting reports of how the conflagration began. Bystanders and Cairenes generally criticized both sides for fighting in a crowded downtown area, with no regard for the safety of others. What is clear

is that the police did not try to stop the clashes. We also find it unlikely that the pro-government Moussa would have marched on party headquarters without informing the GoE of his intentions and obtaining at least tacit approval. The regime's intentions regarding a possible Nour release are opaque to us. The GOE has signaled to us that it is interested in strengthening bilateral relations (ref C). Nour's release would be a step in this direction. We will raise this incident privately with our GoE interlocutors, especially the lack of a police response. With details still unclear, we agree with Kassem's analysis that a public statement now would be counterproductive.

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